

## What can white people do? Listening, challenging ignorance, generous encounters, and the 'not yet' as diversity research praxis

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What Can White People Do? Listening, Challenging Ignorance, Generous Encounters,  
and the 'Not Yet' as Diversity Research Praxis

## **What Can White People Do? Listening, Challenging Ignorance, Generous Encounters, and the 'Not Yet' as Diversity Research Praxis**

### **Abstract**

Responding to the call to theorise praxis in relation to philosophy and white diversity research, I draw on philosophers of race, and in particular, collective white ignorance, and generous encounters to argue for listening as a form of progressive white praxis. Whilst praxis has been theorised in feminist theory in relation to knowledge, standpoint and bodies, literature neglects how whiteness structures the production of knowledge and praxis. I argue that an understanding of white praxis should entail an examination of white epistemology, white ignorance and encounters with the stranger. At the same time, heeding critical race theorists' cautions about critical whiteness studies and white feminism, I propose ways in which listening could begin to work as a form of white praxis responding to racism in research on diversity and organisations.

## **What Can White People Do? Listening, Challenging Ignorance, Generous Encounters, and the 'Not Yet' as Diversity Research Praxis**

'But what are white people to do?' That question is not necessarily misguided, although it does re-center on white agency... It is a question asked persistently in response to hearing about racism and colonialism... The impulse towards action is understandable and complicated; it can be both a defense against the 'shock' of hearing about racism (and the shock of the complicity revealed by the very 'shock' that 'this' was a 'shock'); it can be an impulse to reconciliation as a 're-covering' of the past (the desire to feel better); it can be about making public one's judgment ('what happened was wrong'); or it can be an expression of solidarity ('I am with you'); or it can simply an orientation towards the openness of the future (rephrased as: 'what can be done?'). But the question, in all of these modes of utterance, can work to *block* hearing; in moving on from the present towards the future, it can also move away from the object of critique, or place the white subject 'outside' that critique in the present of the hearing. In other words, the desire to act, to move, or even to move on, can stop the message 'getting through' (Ahmed, 2004).

## Introduction

In this important quote, critical race theorist, Sara Ahmed challenges the motivation of those of us positioned as white to take central stage and act, which speaks directly to the call for papers for this special issue. Our urgency as white people blocks understanding our own complicity in racism and colonialism. Or in the words of black philosopher, George Yancy 'white people [should] not to move too quickly when confronted by the muck and mire of their own whiteness (2015: 3). Ahmed insists that white people's yearning to make a difference means that we see ourselves as the source of good praxis, denying the agency and capacity of the Other and over-emphasising our ability to transcend the conditions of white power. Acting blocks Others. By detailing the ways that acting for Others can be a form of self-protection and self-aggrandisement, she raises incisive questions for critical diversity research praxis and the perennial anxiety: 'what can white people do' (Ahmed, 2004; Alcoff, 1998)?

To think about this question means defining whiteness, no easy task because whiteness is so complex, systemic, often-hidden and multidimensional. Critical whiteness theorists from African American W.E.B. DuBois in 1935 onwards emphasise that whiteness is not just about phenotype but power and privilege (Nkomo and Al Ariss, 2014; Mills). Hence, critical whiteness studies examines the social, economic and political significance of whiteness and its connection to the persistence of racism (Guess, 2006: 630-31). Whiteness has been conceptualized through various perspectives as a constellation of social and cultural practices, a performance, a bodily style, a discursive practice, a psychosocial process, a strategic resource, an epistemology, lived bodily experience and a relation to space (Frankenberg, 2001; Levine-Rasky, 2016; Moreton-Robinson, 2001; Steyn and Conway, 2010). An influential definition is Ruth Frankenberg's (1993) characterisation of whiteness as a location of structural privilege, a standpoint from which white people understand themselves in relation to others and a set of cultural practices. Whiteness is 'the production and reproduction of dominance rather than subordination, normativity rather than marginality, and privilege rather than disadvantage' (Frankenberg, 1993 cited Nkomo and Al Ariss, 2014: 390). Whiteness is relational, contextual and intersectional, and not essentially attached to white bodies nor monolithic, unified, or fixed; hence, white is distinguished from whiteness (Bonnett, 1996; Frankenberg, 1993; McLaren, 2000; Levine-Rasky, 2016).

Whiteness operates ideologically, discursively, bodily culturally and materially with white privilege bestowed, protected, and legitimated through various state, cultural, institutional and organisational mechanisms and discourses which work overt and covertly (ibid). Whilst whiteness as a site of privilege is intersected by gender and class, these other axes of advantage and subordination do not 'render irrelevant race privilege

but, rather inflect or modify it (Frankenberg, 2001: 76). Hence, 'all whites have access to symbolic capital of whiteness' (Nkomo and Al Ariss, 2014: 396). In essence, whiteness shift in its effects and manifestations in different national, historical and colonial contexts. As Peter McLaren writes, 'white culture is not monolithic, and its borders must be understood as malleable and porous. It is the historically specific confluence of economic, geopolitical and ethnocultural processes' (2000: 148).

The call for papers invites critical diversity researchers to bring philosophy to bear on praxis in relation to social change and addressing inequalities, and I turn to philosophers of race and whiteness to explore white praxis in relation to diversity studies research. Black activists and academics insist white academics often to do too much without any real understanding of their own complicity in racism and hence, white researchers need to listen and learn (Ahmed, 2004; Davis, 2010; Thompson, 2003; Yancy, 2015). White academics don't always recognise that race matters or that their agency is connected to their status as white (Appelbaum, 2008). Moreover, black activists and academics stress the job of racially minoritised people is not to teach white people, or make white people feel good (Dreher, 2009; Srivastava, 2005).

Of significance to this paper is that white feminism has been criticised for its collective ignorance and complicity in racism. Whiteness is inflected by class with white middle class femininity associated with being and doing good, dating back to colonial Christian femininities (Appelbaum, 2010; Haggis and Scheh, 2000). Furthermore, black activists and academics caution white feminists to think carefully about mobilising the category of woman as a universal bond of identification; wanting to be and do good, meaning well, and speaking on behalf of Others (Alcoff, 1991; Ahmed, 2000; Appelbaum, 2010; Haggis and Schech, 2000; Moreton-Robinson, 2000; 2010). Thus, white middle class feminists must keep learning about their whiteness, privilege, power and complicity, without ever achieving anti-racist status, transcending whiteness, or desiring to master knowledge of the Other (Alcoff, 2006; Dreher, 2009). Indeed, much feminist praxis, in spite of 'mantras of difference' is 'remarkably white' (Haggis and Schech, 2000: 387). This is not to say that black feminist activism or scholarship does not exist nor make significant strides. Indeed, contra to the postfeminist marketing injunction, white feminists should not 'just do it'.

In this paper, I ask what not rushing to act means for white feminists in critical diversity studies and organisational studies. How might hearing racism become praxis? Although philosophers of race debate how possible white progressive praxis is in relation to race and racism. For instance, Charles Mills, Linda Alcoff, George Yancy and Shannon Sullivan are doubtful about the potential for white people to change; with Sullivan, the most hopeful, even describing what she does as 'pessimistic activism'

(2007: 233). For Mills, a leading North American black philosopher, white habits are so difficult to shift because they garner white people a 'material payoff...rooted in a political economy of systematic racial advantage (cited Sullivan, 2007: 233). White people are too invested in whiteness to change. Moreover, 'well-intentioned' white people can further 're-embed racism' as they attempt to transform white habits (Sullivan, 2007: 233). But this 'double bind' catalyses action, because if white people can stop worrying about themselves, they can 'spend more energy figuring out the situation and what might be done to improve it' (Sullivan 200: 234). But critical race theorists are wary of white praxis because as they vehemently critique it can recentre the white self as a good white person: on the 'good side', someone who 'gets it' (Yancy, 2015). Intense questions are raised as to whether white people can address systemic racism in which they are deeply implicated. Thus, critical race theorists and activists view white praxis with suspicion and cynicism.

In response to the call, I focus on race and whiteness, and their theorising, as opposed to other social axes of difference, because there is a need for research in critical diversity studies in relation to whiteness, racism and racialisation. In so doing, I do not discuss ethnicity or ethnic privilege which need their own focus given the complex debates on racialisation of ethnicity and racialisation of religion and my focus on diversity studies in the US, Australia and UK, where the racialisation of blackness structures cultural and material practices of whiteness. As far back as 1992 Stella Nkomo questioned the whiteness of organisational studies, and nearly fifteen years ago, Diane Grimes (2001) wrote that whiteness shapes who and what is not heard in organisational studies. Indeed as Stella Nkomo and Akram Al Ariss (2014) stress the complex history of race and white privilege in organisations dates back to the nineteenth century and yet, organisation studies still marginalises such research, meaning that white privilege is largely invisible, and race seen only to affect black and minoritised people (2014: 398). Whilst there is an emergent literature on whiteness in organisations, mostly but not always led by academics of colour, it still a marginal topic of research and teaching, even in critical diversity studies, where gender is often prioritised (Al Ariss et al., 2014; Grimes, 2000; 2001; Hunter, 2010; Hunter et al, 2010. Liu and Baker, 2014; Liu & Pechenkina, 2016; MaCalpine, & Marsh, 2005; Nkomo, 200; Nkomo and Al Ariss, 2014; Parker and Grimes, 2009; Samaluk, 2014; Shore, 2002, 2010; Swan, 2010).

How can we understand this relative neglect in both mainstream organisational studies and critical diversity studies? How to account for a systemic ignorance of racism and whiteness in diversity and organisational management studies. To examine the complexities of white praxis, I turn to critical race theorists who describe the collective white production of ignorance, followed by emerging literature on the politics of listening. My aim is to show how listening may be one way in which white academics

can contribute to praxis as kind of 'not doing doing'. I listen to these literatures in a deep, sustained way so that their challenges can be heard: 'to tarry' in relation to whiteness and race, as Yancy proposes (2015). Whilst the ideas of white philosophers, Judith Butler and Michel Foucault influence critical diversity theorists intensively, to date, work on the 'white epistemology of ignorance' (Mills, 1997; 2000; 2007), generous encountering and the phenomenology of whiteness have yet to stop white academics in their tracks (Ahmed, 2000; 2004). And yet, Ahmed and Mills offer incisive philosophical arguments about racism and praxis through a genealogy of critical race theorists such as Lorde, Fanon, Du Bois, Spivak insist that before acting, white people must learn about their participation and investment in racism, in ways which mean they can never 'arrive', a good white, fixed, in a 'state of anti-racism' (Yancy, 2015): acknowledging, As George Lipsitz puts it, 'the impossibility of the anti-racist white subject' (cited Wiegman, 1999: 123).

My aim is to contribute to knowledge about praxis in relation to race and critical diversity, responding to the call for papers with a focus on philosophical ideas, but drawn uniquely from philosophy of race. In writing the paper, as a white British middle aged middle class white women currently living and working in Australia, I was keen to avoid the kind of white-indulgent self-reflexivity that returns white narcissism to the centre, and taking a lead from white critical whiteness theorist, Shelly Tochluk's (2010) approach, I use pronouns 'we' and 'our' to speak directly to white people, which may be potentially distancing for people of colour but attempt to place myself in relation to whiteness. In speaking to white people, I am not recentring whiteness but calling it to account.

## **Praxically Speaking**

First to explain praxis, by providing a brief overview of definitional work. In explaining the meaning of praxis, scholars recount its long history back to Ancient Greece and Aristotle's conceptualisation of praxis as a specialised form of knowing based on action, which he distinguished from theoretical knowing (Holmes and Warelow, 2000). Furthermore, for Aristotle, apprehending theoretical knowledge required practical ability (Liinason, 2007: 52). Theorists turn to Karl Marx as the next thinker who explained praxis as the conscious analysis of social conditions needed to transform the self and the world. Philosopher Peter Critchley (1997) emphasises that for Marx, true knowledge was not contemplative but active. Hence, for Marx, knowing practices entail 'being in' and 'acting upon the world' (Critchley, 1997). After Marx, other leading praxis thinkers include Hannah Arendt for whom praxis represents a concern for care and well-being and for Paulo Freire praxis is conscientization, learning about the world in order to change it for the better. The common ground for these thinkers is that praxis

refers to how theory and practice, thoughts and action are dialectical (Holmes and Warelow, 2000): a way of knowing that transforms what is known and intervenes in the world to transform it (Benesch, 2013).

Second wave feminism brought a particular emphasis to the relation between positionality, ways of knowing and praxis, with Liz Stanley (1990) in her edited book, distinguishing praxis as 'knowledge for' not 'knowledge what'. Subsequently, for feminists and critical race theorists, praxis closes the separation between subject and object, knowledge and reality, and theory and practice (Ahmed 1996, 1998; hooks 1994). Theory is not applied to something called practice, like a coat of conceptual paint onto a worldly wall. Thus, Sara Ahmed insists that feminist theory 'intervenes in sites of inequality' through 'interpretative and communicative strategies' to bring about social change (1996: 79). Whilst theorists differ on how to interpret how theory and practice work together, most agree that praxis entails an intimate relationship between thought and action (Holmes and Warelow, 2000).

But this means asking how to conceptualise knowledge production. And who does it, given that social identities and the context of knowers affect epistemic practices: a critical issue in feminist epistemology as the authors in the call for papers stress (Alcoff, 2007; Sullivan, 2006). In this vein, feminist Mia Liinason (2007) argues that understanding praxis as phenomenologically contextual helps to distinguish between 'rationalist knowledge' with its epistemic separation between subject and object; and 'knowledge as praxis' based on a two-way relation of 'mutual dependence' between subject and object. Praxis is phenomenological because making knowledge is about 'being attentive' to the world through embodied relations. In other words, the knowing subject and her habits, norms, customs and relations are 'deeply interwoven' in an embodied way in knowledge production. Our 'relation to the world, and thus our knowledge of the world, is derived from our position in the world' (2007: 53). Liinason's main point is that feminist scholarship cannot avoid power asymmetries because it is intertwined with culture, politics and power. Power is part of a feminist's relation to her research. This means that feminist research should not reconstruct the world but rather examine our relations to the world.

And yet, whilst the work of Ahmed who is critical race and queer theorist influences Liinason strangely, and yet perhaps, predictably, she does not foreground race's relation to epistemic practices. She does not examine bodies, habits or relations as racialised, and fails to see how epistemic resources are distributed differentially by race and thus, how ignorance is produced within an economic, cultural and social system (Alcoff, 2007). In response to this neglect, I suggest we need to ask how race affects knowledge production. If as Liinason writes, our bodies, habits, norms, customs and



ideas inflect how knowledge is produced, then how will white habits, norms, customs and ideas affect how knowledge about race and racism is produced (or not)? How do white academics become 'inattentive' rather than 'attentive' to race? How does it become something that is not perceived, not apprehended? And what does this mean for praxis? To address these issues, I introduce philosophers of white ignorance.

## **White Ignorance**

Theorists stress that whiteness operates through ignorance. For example, Peter McLaren argues that:

Whiteness operates by means of its constitution as a universalizing authority by which the hegemonic, white, bourgeois subject appropriates the right to speak on behalf of everyone who is non-white while denying voice and agency to these others in the name of civilised humankind. Whiteness constitutes and demarcates ideas, feelings, knowledge, social practices, cultural formations, and systems of intelligibility that are identified with or attributed to white people and that are invested in by white people as 'white'. Whiteness is also a refusal to acknowledge how people are implicated in certain social relations of privilege and relations of domination and subordination. Whiteness, then, can be considered as a form of social amnesia associated with modes of subjectivity within particular sites (2000: 150).

Hence, to understand how white people are complicit in racism intentionally, unintentionally, collectively and unconsciously, critical race philosophers theorise a white 'epistemology of ignorance' (Frye, 1983; Mills, 1997, 2007; Sullivan and Tuana, 2007). Du Bois, author of *Souls of White Folks* in 1935 was one of the first theorists of whiteness to question white superiority and white privilege as a global racist system long before the emergence of critical white studies (Rabaka, 2007). DuBois insists on understanding white supremacy as global and social, so systemic and systematic, and personal and political i.e. to do with racist mores and manners (ibid). Extending his project, black philosopher Charles Mills has written extensively on the racialised dynamics of knowing. His overall view is that white people see the world from a distorted white 'standpoint' authorised by a racialised social contract (1997; 2007; 2008). As he explains:

on matters related to race, the Racial Contract prescribes for its signatories an inverted epistemology, an epistemology of ignorance, a particular pattern of localized and global cognitive dysfunctions (which are psychologically and

socially functional), producing the ironic outcome that whites ill in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made (1997: 2).

Thus, he stresses that white people 'will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made' (1997: 18). In this view, a white point of view 'projects a 'delusional world,' 'a racial fantasyland,' and 'a consensual hallucination' (Gibson, cited in Mills, 1997: 18). To produce this collective ignorance, white people participate in a deep and systematic form of forgetting about, or refusing to recognise, their implication in relations of domination, subordination and privilege; and the injustice, cruelty and suffering they cause (Mills, 1997; 2007; 2008; Sullivan and Tuana, 2007).

The main thrust of this scholarship is to de-individualise white ignorance, explaining its historic, collective manufacture, processes and effects. Hence, ignorance in relation to race constitutes more than a 'gap in knowledge', an 'epistemic oversight', or 'anomaly' (Mills, 1997, 2007; Sullivan and Tuana, 2007). Indeed, ignorance is not the opposite of knowledge: the production of ignorance entails the production of knowledge. As Alcoff sums it up pithily: theorists see ignorance 'not as a feature of neglectful epistemic practice but as a substantive epistemic practice in itself' (2007:39).

Of great significance is that white ignorance requires active individual and collective labour, 'appalling achievement' and 'grotesque prodigious effort' (Spelman 2007:120). White ignorance is not about an individual lack of knowledge or motivation but a structural epistemic formation based on individual and collective positive pay-offs (Mills, 1997; Alcoff, 2007). Hence, it is a systematic, 'implicit agreement to misrepresent the world' (Mills, 1997: 80). A wilful ignorance which is 'socially acceptable' (Alcoff, 2007). Importantly, this lack of knowledge is not accidental but actively produced to dominate and exploit (Mills, 1997; 2007; 2008; Sullivan and Tuana, 2007). White people are motivated- even desire- to stay ignorant. Hence, for Mills, the racial contract prescribes ignorance. Thus, 'structured blindness and opacities' are required to establish and maintain the white polity' (Mills, 1997: 19). Ignorance is epistemic, ethical, political and moral: the 'cognitive and moral economy psychically required for conquest, colonization, and enslavement' (Mills, 1997: 18–19).

The aim of the racial state, the legal system, the economy is to 'privilege Whites as a group at the expense of non-Whites' (Mill, 2007: 157). In this way, 'all Whites are beneficiaries of the contract, though some Whites are not signatories to it.' (1997: 59). White people are oblivious to racism and white domination as a result of an oppressive 'institutionalized politico-economic structure' operating through economic exploitation, uneven distribution of public goods and services such as housing and violence of the prison, army and police (Mills, 1997: 4; Sullivan and Tuana, 2007). These structural

social and economic conditions produce identities and modes of belief that are 'epistemically defective' (Alcoff, 2007). Racialised ignorance is constructed, sustained and perpetuated through institutions and the media, which importantly for this paper, includes education, universities and research (Davis, 2010; Phoenix, 2010; Sullivan, 2007; Yancy, 2015).

To produce such phenomenal and sustained ignorance of racism and white domination, white people perform 'carefully crafted methods of not knowing' (May 2006: 109). Such epistemic practices include cognitive, perceptive and affective processes on a spectrum including 'misunderstanding, misrepresentation, evasion, self-deception, historical amnesia, and moral rationalization' (Mills 1997: 190). As a result of these individual and collective practices, white do not see themselves or their world as oppressive, and when presented with countervailing evidence, find ways to dismiss the evidence (Alcoff, 2007). Thus, ignorance involves denying the epistemic authority of others through active 'hostility toward the testimony and credibility of non-white people' (Sullivan and Tuana, 2007: 3). Systemically, some 'knowers' and understandings of the world are heard and others marginalized or derided (May, 2006: 110). As Vivian May writes:

There are many things those in dominant groups are taught not to know, encouraged not to see, and the privileged are rewarded for this state of not-knowing. Wilful ignorance is in other words, explicitly taught (although this fact is then usually denied such that social inequalities are not socially constructed and regulated but, instead, the result of genes or nature, merit or hard work, or culture). ...Those who are 'invited' to partake of the privileges of the dominant social order (for example, via education) are forcefully asked to comply, to participate in wilful ignorance or face failure, marginalization (ibid: 113).

The main point May stresses here is the multifaceted nature of wilful ignorance, and the social practices and institutions which sustain its expansiveness and intensiveness. There are psychological defenses at play too. White people want to be 'immunised' from knowing more (Spelman, 2007). Thus, 'White America remains unable to believe that Black America's grievances are real; they are unable to believe this because they cannot face what this fact says about themselves and their country' (Baldwin, 1985: 536 cited Spelman, 2007: 119). Wilful ignorance entails an 'agreement to know the world wrongly that is rewarded and encouraged because it serves to maintain the status quo' (May, 2006: 109).

### **White Feminist Complicity**

Black feminists have repeatedly shown how wilful ignorance structures white feminism, even when the latter claims to be anti-racist (Moreton-Robinson, 2000; 2010; Sullivan and Tuana, 2007). Indeed, some authors suggest that white feminists' investment in being and doing 'good' means that we cannot see how we are epistemically flawed, misrepresent our own interventions, do not hear Black feminist critiques, and reap benefits from racism (Appelbaum, 2010; Davis, 2010; Haggis & Schech, 2000; Moreton-Robinson, 2000). Over forty years ago, white feminist Adrienne Rich (1979) admonished white feminism about its white solipsism and complicity in racism.

Critical race theorists caution how critical whiteness studies can intensify white people's need to be seen as good and reproduce white ignorance, sand narcissism (Ahmed, 2004; 2005; Appelbaum, 2010; Chow, 2002; Grimes, 2000; 2001; Wiegman, 1999). They caution how white people attempts at praxis turn into self-feeling. Thus, Ahmed assails that when white people feel bad on behalf of black and minority ethnic people, they reproduce a fantasy that they know how the other feels, a form of appropriation, in which 'the pain of others becomes 'ours' (2005: 74). In 'taking on' this feeling of pain, she suggests that white people start to feel good about their capacity for empathy, identification and feelings of shame. In a related critique, Sarit Srivastava (2005) argues white feminists construct themselves as good, non-racist, kind and caring through a 'personalized antiracist ethic' of confession (2005: 31). This works to prove an individual's goodness and lack of ignorance and racism. Anti-racism in this form becomes individualised moral self-development not organizational change (2005: 44). In her words, 'empathy anti-racism' becomes a 'character reference' rather a form of 'political analysis'. She questions whether empathetic anti-racism, in which white people know better, feel better and become better people, actually mean that white people actually do any thing that is better. Rey Chow (2002) show how white benevolence claims to act as a corrective to more brutal racisms, whilst generating its own pernicious discrimination. As a result, white feminists can become absorbed in their own emotions rather than the material conditions affecting black and minority ethnic people (Ahmed 2005; Thompson 2003; Srivastava, 2005).

Another form of praxis by white academics is to declare oneself white/racist/anti-racist. Ahmed (2004) cautions that these fail as anti-racist praxis because announcing oneself as white/racist are taken up as signs of being good practice: 'if we admit to being bad, then we show that we are good' (2004, 2005). Such speech acts do not produce helpful praxis because they do not commit any individual, group or institution to anti-racist action. Instead, white self-reflexivity can reproduce white privilege, consolidating a fantasy that white people transcend whiteness and racism, and claim anti-racism as a source of white pride. Such declarations are 'non-performative' because 'the conditions

are not in place that would allow such declarations to do what they say' (2004). For education researcher, John Preston (2007), these declarations are classed, with the white confessional yet another form of white bourgeois cultural distinction in relation to working class white people, positioning them as deeply racist. Hence, class and gender inflect the performance of white goodness.

So far in the paper, I have shown that white knowledge as praxis can be profoundly and gravely epistemically flawed, 'distorting and perverse' (Shannon, 2007). Moreover, white reflexivity can stall transformatory praxis. As white feminists we need to understand we actively make ignorance, and how our ideas about how to do praxis are related to our ignorance. Challenging one's own racialised ignorance is remarkably difficult because of the way that whiteness is structured, invested in, encouraged historically, psychically and structurally and ingrained in bodies and psyches (Appelbaum, 2016; Shannon, 2007). One way forward is to respond to return to calls from critical race theorists and activists for white people to listen.

### **White Feminist Listening**

There is an emergent inter-disciplinary literature on the politics of listening in relation to inequalities (Bicksford, 1996; Dreher, 2009; O'Donnell et al., 2009; Potter, 2015; Thill, 2015). In particular, theorists emphasise that ethical practices of listening are not about good feeling, feeling better, or feeling sorted (Dreher, 2009; Thill, 2015). Listening is not a feel-good panacea. To make any difference, it requires a different form of white subjectivity and habits and theoretical groundedness. For example, in a careful account of her own attempts at what I would call listening as white praxis, Tanja Dreher (2009) argues that listening politically means not dominating the space, allowing other discourses to circulate, and learning without expecting the Other to teach. In summary, listening can discourage the 'presumptuous and oppressive practices of speaking for' (Alcoff 1991: 17). But at the same time, a white person cannot transcend or cede their power or their whiteness through listening.

Practically, for Dreher, 'receptive' listening by white people entails a shift to the margins of discussions, including seeking permission to listen on an ongoing basis. She stresses that white listening may not be welcome or appropriate, and absenting oneself may be appropriate. Listeners must be active and work at how they listen and what they hear. Political listening has a clear aim of producing social change through a kind of consciousness-raising rather than being an interpersonal relation of consensus, empathy, therapy or friendship. Audrey Thompson underscores the labour required of white listeners:

You need to learn to become unintrusive, unimportant, patient to the point of tears, while at the same time open to learning any possible lessons. You will also have to come to terms with the sense of alienation, of not belonging, of having your world thoroughly disrupted, having it criticised and scrutinised from the point of view of those who have been harmed by it, having important concepts central to it dismissed, being viewed with mistrust, being seen as of no consequence except as an object of mistrust (Thompson, 2003, cited Dreher, 2009: 12).

Political listening can be understood as an epistemic practice because as Dreher and Thompson accentuate, listeners may hear how Others experience her whiteness and her feminism, pointing up why her good intentions count for little (2009: 13). This kind of listening is risky, painful, difficult and profoundly discomfiting but as Moreton-Robinson (2008) insists not as painful as racism for Indigenous Australians or other Others. Ultimately, the goal of political listening is the decentring of privileged white and gendered interests and feelings oriented to facilitate actions that racially minoritised women raise.

But listening is not intrinsically progressive. Catherine Thill writes 'there is nothing inherently democratic, open or transformative about listening': it is 'not always open, empathetic or transformative' (2015: 539). A case in point: certain kinds of listening technologies feature in Australian debates on the infamous Northern Territories Intervention but preserve the iniquitous status quo for Indigenous people (Thill, 2015). Alison Jones insists that 'good intentions by the dominant group are not always sufficient to enable their ears to 'hear', and therefore for the other to 'speak' (1999 cited Dreher, 2009: 5). Moreover, she stresses 'the possibility that the other cannot or might not want to be 'known' or consumed by them, or to teach them' (1999 cited Dreher, 1999: 13). Minoritised groups often have little choice but to listen to privileged voices rather than being heard themselves. Thus, for Dreher, an ethical form of listening entails creating a space and white habits where the Other can speak if she wants to. It is not about 'passive openness' nor a way to silence others or disengage from difficult discussions (Thill, 2015). Finally, Thill stresses the limits to what listening can achieve: thus she highlights that 'what follows listening' matters and must bring about political action and the redistribution of material resources.

### **Encountering the Other**

A praxis of listening to the Other means 'encountering' the Other. Although writing on listening shows how white people can become better listeners, potentially addressing ignorance, authors do not take into account how whiteness mediates listening bodies,

ears and spaces. Ahmed insists that encounters with the Other have histories and social relations which affect bodies and space and therefore the ability to listen. Like Dreher and Thill, she insists that listening is not about assuming a 'position of listening' or liberal theories of giving voice but her work extends our understanding of listening as white praxis (Ahmed et al, 2000: 17). Philosophically complex, her work does not come with easy prescriptions but challenges ideas on what it means to listen.

The fulcrum of her argument is that we already recognise who and what the Other is before we meet them because of ideas and affects that have circulated in the media, policy and culture, and in our own lives (Ahmed, 2000; 2002). As a result, Others get 'strangered', even though the stranger is not that strange, given how knowable they are, and how close they have to get to us to be made knowably strange. Othering and strangering are based on epistemologies and epistemic communities. Hence, in a process akin to commodity fetishism, we transform the Other into a predetermined, pre-judged, universalised figure rather than apprehending the particularity of our encounters with them. In the terms of the epistemology of white ignorance, such encounters with the Other reproduce already existing white knowledge and in turn, consolidate racialised ignorance.

Particularity as a means of knowing/not knowing is critical to Ahmed's understanding (2000; 2002). First, particularity is about how racial difference is made. Thus, particularity is not about 'grasping the imagined difference of the Other'; not about 'accessing particularity through an individual's face, body or expression', even though we try to read through visual appearance, as a result 'turning her into a 'theme, concept or thing' (2002: 563). The particularity of the Other cannot be found on or in another's body (ibid). Indeed, 'particularity...does not belong to an other' (ibid). In Ahmed's use, particularity refers to the meetings and encounters which produce others, and 'differentiate others from other others'. It is the encounters themselves which differentiate people.

Secondly then, particularity is about the historical and economic conditions and legacies that enable social relations: 'the sociality of the 'with' (2002: 581). Individual, colonial and geo-political pasts and identifications and misrecognitions shape our meetings with the Other. Encounters are re-encounters in that they carry traces of what has already taken place (2000: 17). They are not discrete events. Difference is produced in relations to other encounters that are determined in other spaces and times. Thus, when we meet the Other face to face, we also meet 'other others'. But there is also a specificity to our encounters. So the epistemic questions to ask are what made temporal and spatial conditions make this encounter possible: how did we arrive here? How is our meeting eventuated by other places and times? What does it make possible, what futures are

opened up? (2002: 582) How come some faces and not others are encountered? Hence, what makes an encounter particular is precisely the history that the encounter re-opens, as well as the future that it might open up (2002: 568). What we know about the Other does not start in this meeting or in the present.

Thirdly, encounters are mediated by non-presence. When we meet Others, they have traces of different histories, lives, forms and textualities. Hence, the Other is not 'fully present in this very moment of the face-to-face'. (2002: 563). Ahmed argues that even when we hear things with others: 'there are always other encounters, other speech acts, scars and traumas, that remain unspoken, unvoiced or not fully spoken or voiced' (2000:156). Thus, 'non-presentness' structures the particularity of encounters. For Ahmed, ethical praxis means we must develop knowledge of what is not fully presented and not absent. The mediated nature of our encounters mean that communication 'does not take place in the present, nor it is about presence' (ibid).

But this is not about a call for a liberal communicative strategy of dialogue, for 'the rendering present of the other's voice', Ahmed emphasizes (ibid). In this 'generous encounter', speaking is not the praxis because history can not be fully presented. As praxis entails 'an ethics of communication', which facilitates what cannot be spoken, is ungraspable and unrealisable. In other words, Ahmed shows us that we will need a different kind of listening to hear what is not 'present as voice', nor got across in the 'here' and 'the now' of the encounter'. It is 'hidden in the mouths that cannot speak' but 'always yonder or approaching, elsewhere and otherwise to the immediacy of 'this encounter' and conveyed through a kind of touch (2002: 565). This form of listening is about non-mastery of the Other, accepting unfinished and incomplete knowledge, enabling surprise and non-strangering.

## **Praxis**

Having provided a comprehensive discussion of philosophical insights on ignorance, listening and encounters, in this final section I ask how these could inform a white feminist praxis for diversity and organisational research.

### **Challenging ignorance**

We need to to understand how we actively make ignorance, and how our ideas about how to do praxis are related to ignorance. As white feminists can start to explore our epistemic community's ignorance and how our practices of knowing, unknowing and not knowing relate to racism and colonialism, and are motivated, deliberate and self-serving (Shannon, 2006). Moreover, Mills stresses that our positionality affects the



questions ask and that white ignorance involves not asking certain questions (Appelbaum, 2008: 296). As organisational theorists, we need to research the structured ways in which ignorance is managed and examine our own and others' labour needed to produce it. José Medina (2013) argues that academics have a 'heightened epistemic responsibility' to challenge individual and collective ignorance by obtaining some self-knowledge, knowledge of others and empirical knowledge of the world. In particular, we should understand how our lives are entangled with the lives of others, and which social positions and network of social relations we and others are located in. Inattention to ignorance is further complicity, making us epistemically irresponsible and unethical researchers. To challenge our ignorance requires an active openness and vigilance in relation to limitations, distortions, lapses, and omissions in our knowledge. He advocates bringing in difference perspectives to research to create epistemic friction amongst people to challenge and help each other improve knowledge. As well as extending our theoretical resources and listening to anti-racist scholars and activists, we can also participate in social media, learning from blogs, twitter, and other activist media. As organisational researchers, we have to see organisations as contexts in which ignorance is further organised and distributed and find ways to challenge the ways we think through finding methods and ideas which bring epistemic friction to our thinking and being (Alcoff, 2007).

Critical race theorists vary in their belief in white people's abilities to challenge ignorance. For example, Mills sees the payoffs from whiteness as too substantial for white people to renege on the racial contract. Alcoff (1998) writes in highly modulated language that that *some* white people *some* of the time to *some* degree abhor white supremacy and want to find better ways to do things. Sullivan and Yancy point to the the generational, habitual and unconscious ways in which we as white people protect ourselves from understanding our part in racism. Yancy believes that 'unflinching ...pedagogical criticality' can 'afford ways of doing whiteness differently' (2015: 33). But whiteness 'ambushes'. Therefore, vigilance and tarrying are key: indeed 'antiracism is a process, not a state of being or something fixed and finally achieved' (2015:21). The antiracist racist is precisely a white person who recognizes the complexity of 'undoing' white racism, and who thinks through the implications of what it means to be white. Others are more pessimistic. Ahmed argues (2004) that 'we cannot simply unlearn privilege when the cultures in which learning take place are shaped by privilege'. Indigenous Australian feminist Aileen Moreton-Robinson writes that, 'the real challenge for white feminists is to theorise the relinquishment of power' (2000: 186).

To make a start, we as white diversity researchers need to educate ourselves on our individual and collective epistemic flaws and psychic processes, working together to critique and challenge our research and teaching practices (Grimes 2001, 2002).

Practically, we could focus on developing reading groups and resources, consciousness-raising and educational groups, and specially convened conference streams and symposia focused on racism and whiteness. We could learn about educational processes and techniques from scholars in the field of anti-racist education, and start with listening (Warren and Hytten, 2004; Utt and Tochluk, 2016; Logue, 2008; Tochluk, 2010, 2013).

## Listening

Equality praxis needs white people to listen carefully to the exposing of racism by racially minoritised others and how racism structures the present. This means that we should learn about our own and other forms of racialisation and how these operate in organisations, including universities where we work. Moreover, in listening we let go of control and dominating (Warren and Hytten, 2004). To do this, we need to undertake sustained reading of critical race and postcolonial theories and non-fiction in order to learn about our histories, whiteness, and racism, to ground ourselves in practical, critical 'self-work' guided by non white discourses (Utt and Tochluk, 2016).

Hence, the epistemic resources that we use to make theory about organisation, diversity, whiteness, gender and other axes of difference need expanding so we can understand how racism underpins organisational processes, including those which bestow white privilege including recruitment, performance reviews, promotion, pay, workplace power, leadership and ideals of the somatic norm and the right fit (Grimes, 2001; Nkomo, 2009; Nkomo and Al Ariss, 2014; Puwar, 2004). It means we need to design research in ways in which accounts of racism can be solicited and represented in research, and we denaturalise colourblindness, meritocracy and inequality (Demirtürk, 2012). And we need to ask ourselves and each other how ignorance produces research designs, analysis and interpretations; methods and interactions with research participants; theories and publications. Indeed, we should explore how the category of diversity and its associated practices operate as a means to further ignorance of racism? We should also listen to the experiences of those racially minoritised colleagues and students in relation to the whiteness and racism of universities, recognising their epistemic authority and credibility (Alcoff, 2007).

To listen means for white people to take on their role and responsibility in these histories of racism and to understand them as 'histories of this present'. And rather moving into wanting to act, white people need to see that the racist world that is critiqued is where they live (Ahmed, 2007). If white people turn to action too soon, wanting 'to know how things can be different *too quickly*, then we might not hear anything at all. (2007: 165). It can reproduce a 'defence against hearing about racism as

an ongoing and unfinished history that we have yet to describe fully'. (2007:165) This means we turn away from white solipsism – self-loathing or self-glorification - and towards others (Ahmed, 2000; 2007). This means recognising and interrupting white savior, missionary and superiority complexes (Tochluk, 2010; Warren and Hytten, 2004) and that understanding racism does not necessarily make us anti-racist (Ahmed, 2007; Yancy, 2015).

### The labour of listening

Whilst literature on listening points to political possibilities, critical race theorists underline how difficult white people find it to listen to accounts of racism, and their participation in, and benefitting from, racism. Philosophers of white ignorance show how the pay offs for white people and their attachment to being good mediates the ability to be able to hear and care about racism. For instance, Alcoff writes:

It is a feature of...race privilege that white people have a choice whether to to hear or not to hear and respond or not respond to the demands and criticism of women of color. Racism differentially distributes epistemic authority to make judgments and determinations (1998: 110).

Moreover, individual and collective practices and habits of evading, marginalising, distancing, countering, denying, producing accounts of their experiences of inequality move in quickly (Appelbaum, 2010).

And at the same time, critical race theorists are in no doubt that addressing inequalities and oppression require white listening, indeed 'fearless listening' (Yancy, 2015). To counter these historical, deeply engrained and rewarded processes requires complex responses. Yancy (2015) stresses that it is difficult for us to escape the deep rabbit hole of whiteness.

whites must learn when and how to be silent, when not to move too quickly to disagree or, for that matter, agree with people of color...For white people, silence and the dynamism of tarrying can create spaces of openness; create important moments of vulnerability, of being wounded, of coming to admit, though painfully, that they thought they knew themselves in ways that they have now come to realize that they were mistaken (Yancy, 2015: 28).

Ultimately, this requires us as white people to live with 'emotional and cognitive dissonance' and the crisis that accompanies the realisation on how we and our lives are 'entangled in the social and psychic web of white racism' (Yancy, 2008: 26). But he is

hopeful that we can uncover, identify, face and challenge structures of whiteness (Yancy, 2015: 26). To do this means recognising our unconscious investment in whiteness and ignorance and our individual and collective mechanisms of defense (Logue, 2008). Anti-racist educators stress how we need to work at being affected by hearing about the facts and the emotions of racism and sit with emotional discomfort and humility (Logue, 2008; Utt and Tochluk, 2016). This means working on being a 'concrete subject of struggle' neither an enemy nor ally, but working on our ambivalence and exploration (Utt and Tochluk, 2016). We have to ask ourselves how committed we really are to increasing our understanding and commitment to fighting racism? We need to reflecting on how our social identities have given us advantages. All of this means learning in fits and starts, being tentative, staying flawed and not making linear progress (Utt and Tochluk, 2016). At the same time, we need to challenge our white solipsism: speaking, thinking and imagining whiteness describes the world and to recognise that we can be 'ignorant, oblivious, arrogant and destructive' all the time we think of ourselves as good (Appelbaum, 2008: 296).

### Generous encounters

To work on our knowledge of racism and whiteness begs the question of how we encounter the Other through 'embodied ethics' (Pullen and Rhodes, 2015). In essence, we need to understand how structures of power mediate and frame the encounter itself. More specifically, in Ahmed's terms, generous encountering means getting closer to the Other so that the differences produced in the encounter through social antagonism and struggle can be felt as part of very encounter itself. But it is also about staying distant so that there is no expectation of overcoming difference, full knowledge of or merger with the Other. As a result, common ground cannot be not assumed but worked at. This means that a praxis of generous encounters is not about speaking but being touched by what cannot be got across, 'what moves between subjects not through voice or speech' (2002: 564-565). As she writes:

In the very 'painstaking labour' of getting closer, of speaking *to* each other, and of working *for* each other, we also get closer to 'other others'. a community that is without ground, and yet not ungrounded (2002: 571)

In ways which are elusive and not easily reduced to prescription, Ahmed is encouraging us to challenge our ignorance-making practices of Othering by listening to the unknowable and ungraspable. This means not fixing, pinning down or knowing the Other and as she writes, feeling the past and being open to the 'not yet' and means recognising how the encounter itself is implicated in broader relations and circuits of

production and exchange' (2000:152). So in our research practices we need to reflect on how our meetings with Others eventuated? What historical and political conditions enabled us to meet? This might mean thinking about colonialism or migration, or our own biographies as classed and gendered subjects. It means thinking about who we don't meet and why? And how our meetings with others links us to other others and their histories. For example, Encarnacion Gutiérrez-Rodríguez (2015) shows how racialised gendered inequalities structure the neoliberal university through institutional racism, migration policies, the colonality of knowledge, historically perceptions, institutional logics and everyday practices of racism. These structure university encounters between academics, and academics and students.

Generous encounters means reflecting on white bodily habits in knowledge and ignorance production. Research and academia are imagined as disembodied and disregarded with white academic authority seen to lie in 'pure mind' (Perrier et al., 2015; Swan, 2005). White bodies can make encounters ungenerous. Thus, in thinking about diversity research encounters, we need to reflect on how the academy, conferences, and research contexts- the conditions of meeting the Other - are structured by white middle class masculine academic embodied habits and space. The whiteness in the university can be understood as 'an ongoing and unfinished history, which orientates bodies in specific directions, affecting how they 'take up' space, and what they 'can do' (2009: 149). In other words, whiteness is produced through what is in reach, to hand – including our methods, capacities, books, concepts, resources. Grimes writes that we need to acknowledge our citational practices and recognise the racial identities of our writers. This will show what we put in reach and tend towards and extend what others who read our work may do.

Our bodily and spatial orientations are the product of habits tending towards objects shapes bodies and worlds (2007: 55). Thus, 'we apprehend the world of shared inheritance, as well as 'who' or 'what' we direct our energy and attention toward (ibid). A shared inheritance in whiteness affects how we 'inhabit space' and 'who' or 'what' we orient ourselves towards, repeating white habits and producing white space. 'Race becomes, in this model, a question of what is within reach, what is available to perceive and to do 'things' with. (Ahmed, 2009: 154). These orientations enable we are white people to move easily and feel at home in organisations, while minoritised others can feel out of place. The habitual actions of bodies give organizations a habitual shape of whiteness: thus, 'spaces acquire the shape of the bodies that "inhabit" them' (Ahmed, 2007: 156). As a result, white people can take up more space, do and reach more in organizations, extending 'into spaces that have already taken their shape' (Ahmed, 2007: 158). Thus, white ignorance is made by orientations in workplaces and universities. As Ahmed writes, racism is evident in 'what 'we' have already done,

whereby the 'we' is an effect of the doing. (2010: 45). The upshot for white academic praxis is that a failure to challenge our intellectual, spatial and bodily inheritance in academia reproduces whiteness, which profoundly what racialised bodies can do.

This means we diversity researchers should attend to the institutional racism, inequalities and embodied encounters in universities, and the organisations we research. Shirley Tate writes that the 'ordinariness of racism in academia' makes universities 'unliveable' for black scholars with its exclusions and white sociability (2014). Hence, we need to think about our minds but also our bodies. As several theorists stress, white privilege is about bodily styles and ways of moving, unconscious habits of white expansiveness, taking the floor and being central stage is at our disposal (Ahmed; Appelbaum, 2008; Puwar; Sullivan, 2006). Ignorance is generationally and bodily transmitted through habits and inattention (Sullivan, 2006). White bodies and habits – 'ordinary gestures, comments, gazes or remarks, while they seem to be fleeting, hit bodies profoundly' leading to feelings of injury and isolation (2015: 7). The white somatic norm becomes the ideal for racially minoritised academics and students to approximate to but one they can only fail to achieve (Puwar, 2004).

Furthermore, we need to reflect on how the racial contract is sustained in part through education to give white people advantages through access to resources and status? And we need to question how the 'white somatic norm' of academia and its imagined objectivity and impartiality inflect these encounters (Puwar, 2004). A rhetoric of diversity having been achieved in universities means that teaching on racism is seen as no longer necessary, and the progression of racially minoritised academics marginal (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, 2015). Fears of being discriminated against and lack of support results in racially minoritised people staying silent about their everyday experiences of racism in the university. Against this backdrop of oppression and privilege, the weight of these structures of ignorance and racist legacies, it will be difficult for those of us who white researchers to pursue 'generous encounters' with the Other in diversity research. Toni Johnson (2013) recommends a praxis in which knowability and unknowability are practised through acknowledging multiple forms of communication – silence, body language, stories, and histories - together with a relativising of strangering as someone already known. This kind of praxis is not simply cognitive but affective and embodied, risky, painful, daunting and ontologically destabilising.

## Social change

Listening must bring about political action, some of which is led by white feminists and others by racially minoritised people. Indeed, the strength of minoritised power, agency, political activism, and survival strategies and political activism should not be

underestimated, even in organisational work contexts (Puwar, 2004; Lugones cited Hoagland, 2007). Going beyond listening and generous encounters in research and teaching, white feminists can get involved in activist struggles for racial justice and build a white anti-racist community of researchers (Tochluk, 2013). We can improve our practices by learning about anti-racist policies, research guidelines and accountability put forward by activist groups (Tochluk, 2013). Further studies can be undertaken as recommended by Nkomo and Al Ariss on different national and workplace histories of white privilege and their repercussions including how it is inflected by colonialism and globalisation. More work can be done on intersectionality and whiteness, illuminating how privilege is unevenly distributed through workplace mechanisms by class, gender and heteronormativity, and how some racially minoritised workers feel ebbs and flows workplace privileges (Holvino, 2010; Atewologun and Sealy, 2014). A critical focus will be researching the mechanisms and practices through racial inequality is maintained in media, education, workplaces, social institutions (Demirtürk, 2012). Intense questions are raised by critical race theorists as to whether white people can address systemic racism in which they are deeply implicated and view white praxis with suspicion and cynicism but the ideas and questions raised in this section go somehow to disinvesting in whiteness and ignorance in small practical ways, with fits and starts, aiming for generous encounters.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, I respond to the call for a discussion of praxis in diversity studies by drawing on critical race theorists and propose that listening, challenging racism, and developing generous encounters in our research could enable a viable praxis for white researchers. What this paper shows is that black scholarship and activists insist that we as white people acknowledge our implication in past and present forms of racism. These demands require that we white people stop in our tracks, and repel our urge to turn away from racism and move into doing things that we are think are right and good. What this really means is a more complex, difficult, painful 'embodied ethics' and understanding, and coming to terms with how the racist and colonial pasts shapes the present and future (Pullen and Rhodes, 2015). This does not mean that white feminists and racially minoritised women and men cannot find ways to create alliances and networks. For example, George Lipsitz details a case study where a coalition between Native Americans and white allies was developed which new racial identities based on 'dynamics of difference and solidarities of sameness' (2008: 121). But part of the future for white people will be to acknowledge the growing challenges to white dominance in society and the cracks in whiteness which are showing (Alcoff, 2015; Demirtürk, 2012). All in our praxis should be 'cautious and careful' (Warren and Hytten, 2004: 331).

Whilst we often think about praxis as grounded in hopes about the future, Ahmed shows us how the past - individual and collective histories –undergird our epistemic habits and our praxis. She stresses that it in understanding the past that we can find new futures of equality:

Feminism is always...future orientated, as a politics that not only calls into question the way in which the world is organized in the present, but also seeks to transform how the world is organized and engender new ways and forms of living. But what kinds of futures are imagined by feminists? ...it is through attending to the multiplicity of the pasts that are never simply behind us, through the traces they leave in the encounters we have in the present, that we can open up the promise of the 'not yet'. (Ahmed, 2002: 558-559)

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